241 It was the practice of agriculture--and we do not know where they borrowed it, if it did not arise among them spontaneously--which enabled them to continue living in the stone age until today.

By cultivating the rich lands of the Juruena Valley and the Serra do Norte and entrusting their sustenance to the soil of the virgin Amazon forests, the Nambicuara were able to continue living until now in that relatively restricted environment. This paradoxical effect of agriculture may not yet have been found elsewhere in so distinctive a form; and because they were forced to subsist by cultivating the earth, they perfected this industry while remaining in a very elementary stage of civilization. Wholly isolated, without any knowledge of white men or their domestic animals [247] such as the dog, the Indians of the Serra do Norte became excellent farmers.

Their plots are always evenly circular. Large open spaces are frequently found in the forest; they are artificial fields, old Nambicuara plots.

The Indians use fire to clear these plots after cutting down the trees, which until now they felled with stone axes. In order to fell a large tree, several axemen gather around it; and the wood, gnawed by the stone, yields sooner than expected. The strength of the axe handle is truly remarkable.

[Fig. 22]

A pointed stick is used to make holes for [planting] seeds.

Maize and manioc are the principal products of Nambicuara agriculture. Both belong to the same species cultivated among us. Maize is of the variety known as white maize or saboró; the manioc [146] has unusual nutritive value. In fact, the manioc cultivated by the Tagnani is the best I have seen, low in fiber content and very rich in starch.

[248] Surely the root does not owe its excellent qualities to the imperfect cultivation of the Indians, but to the very fertile land where it is planted.

The great ethnographic question raised by aboriginal agriculture and brought into sharp focus by Martius still remains unanswered.

Neither maize nor manioc have been found growing wild in the jungle. Either these plants came from elsewhere with the Indians,